

CRITICAL THINKING QURANIC STUDIES TEXTBOOK YEAR 1

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CRITICAL THINKING
AND THE
CHRONOLOGICAL QURAN
IN THE
LIFE OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD

THE YEAR
1
OF THE REVELATION
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REVISED EDITION

INTRODUCTION BY
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LESSON 5. CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGY

QUESTIONING DEEPLY: RAISING AND PURSUING SIGNIFICANT QUESTIONS

When reading a sign (verse, *ayah*), critical thinkers look for the issues that underlie what the signs are stating. They come to their own understanding of the details. They then place this in a larger context. They move between the basic underlying issues and the larger picture of the issue at hand. They remain focused on the issue as they follow a line of thought. They organize the issues in their own way as they continue to raise questions about the issue as they increase their knowledge.

QURANIC CHAPTER 1: THE OPENING (AL-FATIAH)

SIGNS 1:1-1:7

Makkah: *In the Name of God,*
The Merciful, The Compassionate. (1:1)
The Praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds, (1:2)
The Merciful, The Compassionate, (1:3)
One Who is Sovereign of the Day of Judgment. (1:4)
You alone we worship and to You alone we pray for help. (1:5)
Guide us on the straight path, (1:6)
the path of those to whom You were gracious,
not the ones against whom You are angry,
nor the ones who go astray. (1:7)

According to traditional sources, Chapter 1 was revealed at the beginning of Muhammad's messengership after signs from other chapters.¹¹

The first response of the Messenger to the One God's commands after learning and knowledge is the formal prayer. The angel Gabriel teaches him the ablution and the formal prayer (*salat*), which he then teaches Khadija and Ali ibn Abu Talib.

COMMENTARY^o

Every Muslim recites this short chapter of seven signs at least seventeen times a day. The Prophet Muhammad said: A formal prayer by one who does not recite the Opening Chapter is invalid.

This short chapter contains a great deal of the central basic ideas of the Quranic message, its beliefs and concepts. It outlines many of its essential perceptions and attitudes. All this makes it clear why it is chosen for frequent recitation and why it is essential for the validity of prayer.

The chapter opens with the phrase: *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.* (1:1)

This is recognized by the majority of scholars as a sign of the chapter, in its own right, completing its signs into seven. There is, however, a difference of opinion over whether this is so with respect to all other chapters of the Quran in which the same words appear as the opening phrase.

The divine attributes of The Merciful and The Compassionate encompass all aspects and meaning of mercy, and can only be used together with respect to God Almighty. It would be appropriate to use the attribute of The Merciful in reference to a human being, but the Quranic message requires that use of The Merciful is exclusive to God. As for the debate over which of the two adjectives denotes the wider meaning of mercy and compassion, it does not concern us here. We can conclude, however, that when combined, they encompass all aspects and dimensions of mercy.

As the invocation of God's name at the beginning of every action constitutes the first fundamental principle of the Muslim faith, the restriction of the use of *The Merciful*, *The Compassionate* to God alone constitutes the second principle and defines the relationship between God and the human being.

Having invoked God's Name and acknowledged His infinite mercy, one is directed to praise God and recognize His absolute sovereignty over all beings. *The Praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds.* (1:2)

The Merciful, *The Compassionate* (1:3) are two attributes that encompass all meanings and aspects of mercy and compassion, and epitomize mercy as a property of God Almighty. These two attributes define the link between the Lord as Creator and His creation. It is a link based entirely on love, peace, reassurance and care, and which inspires within us a spontaneous feeling of gratitude and praise towards God.

This: *One Who is Sovereign of the Day of Judgment* (1:4) states a fundamental Quranic principle that has a most profound influence on human life: belief in the hereafter. The Quran comments on the curious fact that people have often believed in God as Creator but have failed to believe in a Day of Judgment, in a life to come, when reward and punishment are meted out to restore the balance of justice.

Human life can never be balanced and equitable until people believe that what they earn in this transient life is not the be-all and the end-all. The human being needs to have the incentive of a confident belief that another life awaits him, which is worth the struggle and the sacrifices and the effort he may have to make here in this short one. This belief brings a fundamental difference in the feelings, attitudes and behavior of those who uphold it. *You alone we worship and to You alone we pray for help.* (1:5) This sign expresses another fundamental

principle that follows logically from the preceding ones. It is also a decisive and crucial principle that draws a line between the freedom the human being gains in submitting to God and the abuse and debasement implicit in the human being's servitude to humanity.

The foremost way of communicating with God is through prayer: *Guide us on the straight path, the path of those to whom You were gracious, not the ones against whom You are angry, nor the ones who go astray.* (1:6-1:7)

With these words a believer pleads to be shown the right way and to be helped along it, which cannot be achieved without God's guidance, care and mercy. To acknowledge that is in itself a recognition of God's sovereignty and dominance over all things and events.

This, then, is the Opening Chapter, the chapter selected for frequent daily recitation, without which Quranic prayers are invalid. Despite its brevity, it contains some of the most fundamental principles of the Quranic faith and certain insights that arise from them.

SUMMARY QURANIC SIGNS 1:1-1:7

WHO IS GOD, THE LORD?

In the first four Quranic revelations, the name of God is not mentioned, but rather one of the names of God, Lord. Here for the first time, we learn the Name of God (Allah) and that God is The Merciful, The Compassionate to whom belongs Praise. What does it mean that God is Merciful? Compassionate? Why are these stated twice? These are just some basic questions that will awaken in you. In addition to the information provided that God is The Merciful, The Compassionate and that all Praise belongs to God, we learn that He is also Sovereign of the Day of Judgment.

HOW ARE THE SIGNS DIRECTED TOWARDS THE COMMUNITY?

Whenever we are praised, we should know that praise belongs to God and not to us. The believers hearing this for the first time might have wondered what that was. Then we are commanded to ask for His guidance on the straight path, the path of those to whom He was gracious and not the path of those who have gone astray. Not knowing any more than this for the early believers must have left them in great anticipation for further explanation of the straight path and what is, as well.

QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

How does "praise belongs to God" come to be the way things are now?

What are the characteristics of the Lord of the worlds?

How do the signs say to worship God?

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- What conclusion do I come to about how to worship God?
- What categories do I see in these signs?
- What solution do I find for being on the straight path?
- Why would the Prophet say these seven signs should be recited in every formal prayer?
- Why do people worship God?
- What are the main concepts in these signs?
- What are the moral implications in these signs?
- What are the most significant questions about these signs?

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

How would you rate yourself? Put a check by the ability you feel confident you have learned. Do not be discouraged if you feel you have not developed any of these abilities or just a few. It takes practice and hopefully with each lesson, you will improve these abilities:

- I am able to ask questions about questions.
- I am able to understand why questioning deeply helps my understanding of these Quranic signs.

LESSON 6. CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGY USING INFORMATION, DATA, FACTS, OBSERVATION EXPERIENCES, REASONED JUDGMENTS

Questions of **information** force you to assess the quality of information, how you are organizing or giving meaning to information. Any questions you ask require information. There are three aspects to this:

1. Thinking has a goal, agenda, purpose.
2. Questions being asked either explicitly or implicitly.
3. Information is being used.

What information is being used?

Where did the information come from?

How can that information be assessed?

If you have information, information never uses itself. Information never gives itself meaning. It deduces implications from itself. Information must be treated by the mind. It must be interpreted. Information must be given a meaning. As Quranic critical thinkers you must make certain to distinguish hard data from the inferences or conclusions that are drawn from them. • You want to identify the key information the Quran is using in these signs to support its main arguments. Look for facts, experiences, and/or data being used to support its conclusions.

QURANIC CHAPTER 111: THE FLAME (AL-LAHAB) SIGNS 111:1-111:5

*Makkah: Ruined were the hands
of Abu Lahab and he was ruined. (111:1)
His wealth availed him not nor whatever he earned. (111:2)
He will roast in a fire, possessing flames (111:3)
and his woman, the carrier of firewood, (111:4)
around her long neck is a rope of palm fibers. (111:5)*

COMMENTARY^o

Abu Lahab, together with his wife, Arwa, known as Umm Jamil, were among the most hostile opponents of God's Messenger and the ideas he propagated.

After the beginning of the revelation, Abu Lahab orders his two sons to renounce Muhammad's two daughters to whom they were to marry before Muhammad's prophetic assignment. Abu Lahab does this in order to burden the Prophet with their living expenses.

Thus, Abu Lahab and his wife continue with their persistent onslaught against Muhammad and his message. The fact that they are close neighbors of Muhammad makes the situation even worse. We